



TRANSFORMING BENGAL: A TRIBUTE TO ISWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR FOR HIS ROLE IN SPREADING EDUCATION AMONG THE MASSES

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ABSTRACT

In this post-modern world human beings are viewed as potential resources and the prosperity of a nation largely depends upon its literate people. Education is thus regarded as compulsory for an all-round development of a country. Indeed, it is integrally linked with the development process. But the scenario was altogether different during the 19th century in Bengal. The people of present generation can't even imagine the then socio-cultural milieu. It was a sorry sight. There was no such conception of universal education. And if any such system was prevailing there its access was only confined to the affluent class. The laymen, devoid of education, were dictated and controlled by religious orthodoxy, social rites and prejudices, different customs and degrading superstitions. Vidyasagar was well aware about this virtual wasteland. He realised that only true education can break the inertia of the society. In other words he regarded education an instrument of social change. It was his firm conviction that true education would empower individuals and communities by generating an awareness of one's own potentialities and inner strength thus enabling people to combat oppression, exclusion and discrimination. This study attempts to point out the crucial role played by Vidyasagar in spreading education among the masses during the 19th century..

KEY WORDS: Mass Education, Bengal Renaissance, Empowerment, Vernacular Education etc.

India has a hoary past that dates back to 2500-3000 B.C. It is regarded as one of the ancient civilizations of the world that has a glorious past. Mention can be made of numerous distinguished personalities like Goutam Buddha, Mahabir, Kalidasha, Banabhatta, King-Harshabardhana, Ashoka, Samudragupta etc. Among the four epics of the world – two – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – belong to this civilization.

But we are ashamed to say that once the nation that rose to the pinnacle of success and glory – during the eighteenth century reached to a state of stupor. There was pervading gloom and darkness. Devoid of education people were then controlled and dictated by religious orthodoxy, social custom and rites, and degrading superstitions. Vidyasagar was well aware about this virtual wasteland. He realised that only true education can break the inertia of the society. In other words he regarded education an instrument of social change. It was his firm conviction that true education would empower individuals and communities by generating an awareness of one's own potentialities and inner strength thus enabling people to combat oppression, exclusion and discrimination.

Thus Vidyasagar was on a mission to spread education among the masses. His days in Fort William College as Head Pundit and Cashier and in Sanskrit College as Principal helped him immensely to wound up experience. Close proximity with great philanthropists like Bethune, Marshman, Mouat, Halliday, Hardinge, Beadon etc. also shaped his ideology to some extent.

When he was in Fort William College, once he requested Hardinge, the then Governor-General of Bengal, to do something for the spreading of mass education. Vidyasagar's appeal borne fruit and in 1844 Hardinge established 101 Bengali medium schools in several parts of Bengal (Samanta 41). The schools, however, did not run properly. There were several reasons. Mention may be made of poor infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, lack of text books etc. The Education Council also blamed lack of trained teachers and books for the closure of the schools in the Bengal Presidency range (Samanta 42). At that time students were also more interested in learning English than the vernacular language because after 1835 onwards with English being the official language – it guaranteed employment.

Vidyasagar took lessons from all these things. He started to translate, write, edit and publish books for the students. He was also conscious about improving the vernacular i.e. Bengali language. In 1847 he published *Betal-panchabingsati* for the Bengali medium students. Bengali translation of Marsahman's *History of Bengal* came into being in the next year. In quick succession *Jiban-charit* (1843), *Bodhodaya* (1951), *Rijupath-I, II, III* (1851-52) were published. The ease, elegance and simplicity of these texts were really noteworthy. These books were gladly welcomed by the students. In fact, the books set the ball rolling of new learning. And later on in 1855 he published the Bengali primer *Varna-parichay* (1st and 2nd part) which is often considered as the epicentre of Bengal Renaissance. It heralded a new age in the annals of Bengal. Then there were *Kathamala* (1856) and *Charita-vali* (1856). The Nobel-Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore even in his childhood days was enthralled by those school books and readers.

New books being available Vidyasagar was now on a mission to set up schools in different parts of Bengal. As the first step in 1853 he established one Anglo-Sanskrit school in his own native village Birsingha. Bengali, Sanskrit and English were taught there. There was also a night school for the students of the peasant community. H.L. Harrison, in his 1864-65 report as the Inspector of Schools mentioned that 117 students read in the Anglo-Sanskrit school, 72 in the Vernacular department and 47 students in the Night school (Samanta 48). The scenario was really encouraging and within a few days Vidyasagar established one Girls' school there. 25 girl students read there. Vidyasagar's parents were actively involved in the whole process. About 60 students stayed in Vidyasagar's house for their education. Vidyasagar bore all the expenses at his own cost.

In the meantime on 7th February 1854 he submitted a memorandum on Mass education and Vernacular education to Mr. F.J. Halliday, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. This note was better known as *Notes on the Vernacular Education*. In the *Notes* he opined that :

“Vernacular Education on an extensive scale, and on an efficient footing, is highly desirable, for it is by this means alone that the condition of the mass of the people can be ameliorated” (Samanta 186).

Regarding the syllabus or curriculum he proposed that :

“Mere reading and writing, and a little of Arithmetic, should not comprise the whole of this Education; Geography, History, Biography, Arithmetic, Geometry, Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, Political Economy, and Physiology should be taught to render it complete” (Samanta 186-87).

The authority was impressed by the deep thinking and earnestness of Vidyasagar. They decided to establish 20 Model schools. Vidyasagar was then appointed as the Assistant Inspector of Schools. And under his able leadership the schools were set up in the four districts – Burdwan, Hoogly, Midnapore and Nadia. About 2738 students read in those schools according to a report of 1856 (Samanta 46).

At that time Vidyasagar was also worried about the future of vernacular education because students were more interested in learning English than Bengali as English education guaranteed employment. So, Vidyasagar in his report to D.P.I. wrote :

“The success of the Vernacular Education will depend materially upon the encouragement given in the way of providing the alumni of those institutions with offices under the Government. People are eager to give their children an English education because they believe that such education would ensure for them public employment and that education in another language would be of no avail” (Samanta 46).

Pragmatist Vidyasagar also perceived that with the onslaught of western invasion the vernacular schools would soon become irrelevant. So he advised that :

“These [schools] should be established in towns and villages, not in the

vicinity of English colleges and schools. In the neighbourhood of English colleges and schools, the vernacular education is not properly appreciated (Samanta 44).

Vidyasagar also felt the necessity of establishing Normal School to train the would-be-teachers because he had bitter experience of the Hardinge schools. So with prior permission from the D.P.I. he started one Normal School in 1855 in the premises of Sanskrit College. Even he prescribed the syllabus for the Normal School. According to a report (Samanta 46) within April 1858, 36 passed out students among 54 were already employed in several schools.

Vidyasagar's activities were limited not only to the sphere of establishing boy's school – he also tried to spread education among the womenfolk of Bengal. He was deeply pained by the injustices done to them. His extensive travel in the interiors of Bengal in the capacity of Assistant Inspector of Schools and later on as the Special Inspector of Schools enabled him to witness the appalling situation. He realized that society could only be transformed when its womenfolk are thoroughly educated. One is reminded of the old African proverb that states:

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family.”¹

When the government decided to extend the grant-in-aid to the Female Schools also – Vidyasagar tried to cash in it. He, within a short span of less than one year – between November 1857 and June 1858 – established 40 girls' (Samanta 52) school in the four districts – Hoogly, Burdwan, Midnapore and Nadia. Often times he had to bear the expenses of books, dresses, pens, pencils etc. According to a report about 1348 girl students read in those schools (Samanta 52). Later on in the post-1857-Mutiny period when the government ceased to provide the grant-in-aid, Vidyasagar set up one trust - *Nari Siksha Prathistan Vandar* to feed the flame of learning. He also associated himself with the Bethune School. In 1856 he became the Secretary of the Managing Committee of Bethune School. Vidyasagar also helped Miss Mary Carpenter to establish one Female Normal School though he was doubtful about its success for the orthodox nature of the Hindu society.

In the later period of his life after resigning from the Sanskrit College he associated himself with the Metropolitan Institution which in 1872 became an intermediate College and in 1879 a degree college. The speciality of this institution is that it was one native College entirely run and governed by the natives.

Before rounding off the discussion the researcher seeks to highlight one issue. By quoting one letter of Vidyasagar, which he had written to Rivers Thompson, Junior-Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1859, in reply to an enquiry into the practicability of promoting cheap education for the masses – some defame him by branding him as elitist. But this is sheer unjust. In the concluding portion of the letter Vidyasagar wrote :

“...the Government should, in my humble opinion, confine itself to the education of the higher classes on a comprehensive scale. By educating one boy in a proper style the Government does more towards the real education of the people, than by teaching a hundred children mere reading, writing and a little of Arithmetic. To educate a whole people is certainly very desirable, but this is a task which, it is doubtful, whether any Government can undertake or fulfil...” (Samanta 208).

After reading the letter one may face difficulty in reconciling the progenitor of mass education with that of the supporter of the elitist filtration model of education – the liberalist with the conservatist.

But our perception will be biased if we don't contextualize it.

Vidyasagar's ideas were noble and his integrity and honesty were unquestionable. But one must understand the then social milieu. The degrading superstition, religious orthodoxy and abject poverty had turned it a virtual wasteland. And these became a stumbling block lying athwart in the path of mass education. The British Government was also then, not interested in spreading education among the masses rather they were much interested in perpetuating their legacy.

Under such circumstances far-sighted Vidyasagar understood the inefficiency and improbability of mass education in the given context. Even Halliday, who was so willing to spread education, regarded mass education as a 'visionary absurdity' (Hatcher 111).

Thus despite his zeal for the improvement of Vernacular education, in the end it seems that Vidyasagar may have shared Halliday's views to some extent. He leaned towards a version of the 'filtration theory'² of education. His educational goals were noble but the social context acted as a deterrent. So, Vidyasagar was compelled to redefine his former ideological stances for the time being. In art of war it is called 'retreat'. But it does not necessarily mean defeat – rather backtrack to leap forward.

NOTES

1. For further details please see the article available at <journals.ed.ac.uk/hydra/article/view/720>
2. Downward 'filtration theory of education' meant the coming down of education from higher classes to lower classes. This concept was introduced by Lord Macaulay through his notorious 1835 *Minute on Education*.

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